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AUTHOR Girard, J. E.
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ABSTRACT

A student-oriented curriculum approach was developed at Edison Community College to encourage retention and sustain students' interest in classes. The five elements of the program are student tutoring, a tournament, attendance monitoring, relaxation training, and retention goals (STARR). The tutorial component involves study teams of four or five students who utilize a "think-tank" approach to in-class and out-of-class problem solving, and student pairs of "study buddies." The teams and study buddies ensure that students have a strong support network, receive immediate feedback, and get to know each other. The attendance component of STARR involves the use of incentives for perfect attendance, such as giving students who do not miss any classes before a test five extra points on that one test. Students are permitted to make up an absence by attending a lecture on the same material that they missed, and many attend optional lectures for extra help. The relaxation training component was developed to reduce students' anxiety about course work and especially about tests. Special anxiety reduction seminars were prepared to train students in progressive muscle relaxation, proper breathing techniques, and test-taking and study techniques. The final component of STARR is a tournament approach to preparing students for the final examination. Using a college bowl format, teams compete for extra credit points by answering true-false and multiple-choice questions, and applied problems. Studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of the various components of STARR. (GFW)

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- ☑ **STUDENT TUTORING**
- ☑ **TOURNAMENT**
- ☑ **ATTENDANCE MONITORING**
- ☑ **RELAXATION TRAINING**
- ☑ **RETENTION GOALS**

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S T A R R

A Student Oriented Curriculum Designed with Retention in Mind

Designed by J.E.Girard, Ph.D.
Edison Community College
Fort Myers, Florida 33907

S T A R R

There are five basic elements to this curriculum:

1. Student Tutoring
2. Tournament
3. Attendance Monitoring
4. Anxiety Reduction
5. Retention Goals

The system grew from a concern about retention rates and an attempt to keep students in classes and in school. Each is explained briefly below.

STUDENT TUTORING:

At the first meeting each student must obtain the names and telephone numbers of at least three other students in the class. Classes break into teams to solve problems in a "lab" type setting. The teams are limited to a maximum of five students because larger groups tend to encourage passiveness in some students. The teams utilize a think-tank approach to problem solving. In addition, each student eventually selects (or may be assigned) a "Study Buddy". Teams and "Study Buddies" may change until the right combination is found. These students interact during class, working as a team to respond to questions, and to solve exercises. Some teams find that they work well together and study outside of class, often meeting to coincide with my office hours so they can receive help when necessary.

An extra credit problem is sometimes assigned in the last few minutes of class. Each team hands in one solution, and gets credit (or fails to get credit) as a team. By the end of the semester, most teams are cohesive and ready to participate in the Tournament explained below.

Many benefits have been derived from this technique. No student needs to feel alone, there is always someone to refer to for help or encouragement, either in class or outside of class. Students receive immediate response to questions and immediate correction of errors. Students must verbalize their understanding of concepts, and thus misconceptions, if any, are corrected before and not after a test. Classes are more consolidated, they get to know one another and there is more reaching out and helping. In many of my classes, before I began this technique, students knew one or two, and in some cases, none of the other students. Since using the "Buddy System" the students know each other and there is a strong support system. Student feedback indicates that this support system contributes to better student retention.

Students become less passive and often take on the role of "VUGA's" --- voluntary undergraduate assistants --- and when my explanation doesn't clear the "fog", a student who had the same or similar difficulty often provides an explanation that does. Students become less intimidated, and learning becomes the central issue.

ATTENDANCE

During the past few years, research has indicated that attendance is the most critical factor in the success or failure of college students. This concerned me because I felt that I had become indifferent to that issue. Like many

college instructors I felt that as adults, my students were ultimately responsible for their own education. Consequently, their attendance at class was not my concern. Although I still believe that the final responsibility is theirs, I realize that it is often difficult to get out of bed on a dark morning, difficult not to go to the beach on a sunny day, and tempting to skip my class when a paper or a decisive test is looming in another class. I began to realize then, that students might need a little extra incentive to show up every day. I decided to put the attendance theory to a test.

In an informal experiment, I treated one class as an experimental group and the other as a control group. The experimental group had attendance monitored, the control group did not. The group that had attendance monitored would be allowed to drop one grade at the end of the semester. The grades on the final examination would be calculated and a difference between means measured. Calling roll took only a few extra minutes (I have 40 to 50 students per class) but within a few weeks, I knew each student's name and roll calling was accomplished during class with at most a few names being called at the end of class. The students would remind me if I forgot because "they wanted credit for being there."

At the end of the semester a t-test indicated a significant difference in overall means between the two classes. The monitored attendance group scored significantly higher. There was also a significant difference between variances for the groups, indicating that the experimental group had more homogeneous scores than the control group.

Student reactions have been positive. Some students perceive this technique to indicate that the teacher is interested in their success. There have been statements

made that "other teachers do not 'care' if I come to class." Students who need to think that someone cares about them respond very positively. Only one negative response has been voiced, that was by a student who had many absences, was marginally passing, and felt that since they had paid for the course, the teacher should not care whether they come to class or not. The student noted this on the teacher evaluation. Most students however, voice a positive reaction. One student even asked me to wake him up if he feel asleep in class; he did not want to be counted "absent". This student worked all night and came to class after only an hour or two of sleep.

I monitor attendance from one test to the next, rather than for the entire semester, as I had done previously. If the student does not miss any classes before a test, they receive 5 extra credit points on that one test. This is easier bookkeeping for the instructor. It also allows the student to begin anew each test period. If a student were to achieve perfect attendance for the entire semester and if five tests are administered, this will have the effect of adding one point per test. When I monitored the entire semester, one absence often had a domino effect for the student who no longer had the extra incentive. The student inevitably fell behind in class work and grades, and then became a potential dropout.

Because I teach three or four sections of the same class, students may "make-up" an absence by attending a lecture on the same material that they missed. Many students begin attending optional lectures for extra help. Some have even used their vacation time from work to attend another class rather than lose the rewards offered. I have conducted informal follow-ups on students who have withdrawn from my classes and the overwhelming majority have withdrawn because they were unable to keep up with the

classwork after a number of absences. These absences are often work or family related and unavoidable, but they still cause students to fail in fulfilling their goals, and if that can be avoided, in even one case, it is certainly worth whatever effort it takes.

ANXIETY REDUCTION

About eight years ago I voiced my concern over the tremendous amount of anxiety I found in my students relating to the course work and especially to the tests. Marie Kitsberg, the friend to whom I spoke has national certification in biofeedback and is on the Board of Directors of the Biofeedback Society of Florida. She is a counselor for the college and is a specialist in relaxation techniques. In no time at all we had a seminar in anxiety reduction prepared for my classes. Students received training in progressive muscle relaxation, and proper breathing techniques as well as test-taking tips and study techniques. The seminars became extremely popular with the students. To fulfill a partial requirement for a Specialist Degree for the University of Florida, Marie conducted a study in my classes using an experimental and control group. Grades on the final examination were used as the test statistic. Although the pretest showed no difference, the post-test, (the final examination) showed a significant difference between the two groups, favoring the experimental group.

The relaxation techniques are used by the students in areas other than my classroom. Mrs. Kitsberg and I have received a great deal of positive feedback regarding these seminars.

TOURNAMENT

The last week of classes is dedicated to review in preparation for the final examination. Since this often seemed monotonous, although necessary, I tried to find a method that would be more interesting and if possible, even fun. I initiated a college bowl type of activity. This activity became known as the STAT Tournament. I prepared a list of questions, that included true-false, multiple-choice, supply, and applied problems. The questions and problems are prepared for the overhead so that the students may see as well as hear each item.

Points awarded for each question vary according to difficulty level. Groups are assigned numbers and a list of randomly generated numbers is used to assign turns for responding to the test items. Teams may be called upon, and run out of time only to be called on again one or two turns later. This was done so that the teams would not stop trying to solve a problem if time ran out on them. Although I promised trips to the Riviera and Jaguar convertibles as prizes, the students enthusiastically accepted the actual rewards of tee shirts with a STAT STAR logo, certificates, and extra credit points. Each student in the highest scoring group may choose to receive extra credit points or to count the final examination as optional. A "lightning round" on the last day keeps each group working until the very last question. The students enjoy the competition, and the review has become more than a mundane review for the final examination.

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